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Taelspin: The Spirit of May Fourth

May 9, 2008 in [Taelspin](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [6 comments](#)

"Hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It is just like roads across the earth. For actually the earth had no roads to begin with, but when many people pass one way, a road is made." – Lu Xun

This past week marked the 89th anniversary of the May 4th demonstrations, the defining event of a decade of intellectual vitality and ideological debate as teachers, students, authors and scholars drew on a panoply of ideas to make sense of the world, their nation, and how best to build a strong and vital society.

At the heart of this movement was a true marketplace of ideas. Young intellectuals rushed to read the latest issues of their favorite journals, of which there were hundreds, pages brimming with the back-and-forth of open minds at work.

The question in the hearts of these youthful, educated elite: How to save China from the ravages of corrupt politicians, avaricious foreign powers, and the stranglehold of old thinking and culture? And yet while the question remained consistent, the answers were a glorious cacophony of disparate ideologies shouted in student halls and debated in faculty dining rooms, scrawled on notebook pages and set in printer's ink.

Whether one was a follower of John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Herbert Spencer, or Karl Marx (among many others), or an academic focused on using new methodologies to mine China's past and cultural heritage, or sought elsewhere for a way to unite a nation against the forces arrayed against her, what made the May Fourth era so special was the free expression of ideas, and the willingness of the intellectual elite to listen, discuss, and then accept or reject different viewpoints on the merits of the arguments presented.

It is a legacy of which China can be justifiably proud. Not only was this a glorious time in the nation's own intellectual history, it was one of the great periods of intellectual dynamism in the 20th century. Whenever I hear the callous remark—too often bandied about these days—that the ability to think for oneself is not a part of Chinese culture, I simply refer them to the debates between Hu Shi and Li Dazhao, the essays and reports which filled the pages of Chen Duxiu's seminal publication *New Youth*, or the acid satire of Lu Xun's stories.

And it wasn't only between the pages. The young people of the May 4th generation organized, demonstrated, boycotted, loved, and lived according to a myriad of competing ideals.

In the PRC, May 4 is celebrated as "Youth Day" and as this important anniversary approached this year (with the added convenience of a May Day holiday), the self-conscious heirs to the May 4th generation organized their own series of demonstrations and boycotts to [mixed success](#).

Like their May 4th predecessors, the young people of China today write espousing a strong Chinese nation and their rhetoric is filled with pride and optimism for their country's future. The passion and fire of May 4 is certainly there as well, even if the new media is an electronic one: Sihu, Tianya, and a universe of blogs and BBSs represent the new *New Youth*.

But something is missing: That marketplace of ideas.

Today in China, even with the government tirelessly trying to limit access to alternative perspectives, bookstores and the Internet still abound with news, essays, translations, history, and philosophy, providing young people with an access to information far beyond the wildest dreams of the May 4th students. But the desire to find out more, the craving to challenge assumptions and formulate multiple perspectives on complex issues is woefully absent. The youth of today write more than ever, more than any generation in recent memory, terabytes of opinion available online—but the anger and passion and fire of the May 4th generation are now enlisted in support of a single worldview and a single perspective on a range of issues. A whole generation whose arguments are hard-wired: an authoritarian success story.

The actions of netizen *fenqing* and “Pro-China” protesters along the Olympic torch route around the world are strikingly antithetical to the spirit of May 4. For too many, it is no longer about expressing one’s own views, supported with the best argument and the most relevant available evidence; it is about using mob psychology, ridicule, intimidation, *ad hominem* attacks, and a variety of other means to silence those with whom they disagree. And the reasons for their disagreeing are for the most part anti-intellectual: I don’t like you, what you say is not what I’ve heard or learned, and those ideas make me uncomfortable—ergo, you’re wrong.

On the more extreme end of the spectrum, in the last few weeks we have seen physical violence in South Korea, the mobbing and intimidation of protesters in Australia, and death threats against a Duke University co-ed. This is not debate. This is debate with CCP-characteristics. Students grow up immersed in a system that teaches people what to think and not how to think. The culture of debate, critical argument, and the rigorous scrutiny and questioning of assumptions is simply not a part of the PRC educational regimen.

That’s a shame. The CCP was founded by key members of the May 4th movement, including Chen Duxiu, and the Party is proud of this heritage. The May 4th demonstrators make up one of the iconic images on the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square. Sadly, though, while the image of the May 4 generation remains chiseled forever in stone, their spirit is rapidly being lost.